

A Salad Bar Featuring Organic Choices



Art by children of Lincoln Elementary

Revitalizing the School Lunch Program

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Introduction

In Olympia, WA a new program is gaining momentum in revitalizing school lunches. The Olympia School District's Organic Choices program is inspired by the growing national Farm-to-School movement, and is concentrated on supporting local and organic agriculture. In the first year of the program, 5 local elementary schools have added organic salad bars and locally grown produce to their menus.

Concerned parents, teachers, and students are raising many food choice issues regarding both children's nutritional needs and the "food system" that produces, processes, and distributes food from farms to cafeterias. Through industrialization and globalization most Americans, and particularly children, have lost touch with both where their food comes from, and how it is grown.

The emerging national Farm-to-School movement is making efforts to increase fresh fruits and vegetables in our school cafeterias. There is government support for these efforts at both the federal and state level, through the USDA's Small Farms/School Meals program and the WSDA Direct Marketing and Small Farms program. The goals of this movement are twofold: 1) to give children the benefits of eating farm fresh food, and 2) to strengthen local economies by purchasing as much locally grown produce as possible.

Elementary school is a crucial age for developing healthy eating habits. Dietary recommendations for children have changed since the inception of the National School Lunch Program in the 1930s, and the standard of foods served has not kept pace. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) America has reached an epidemic point in childhood obesity and diabetes. Children are increasingly inundated with packaged, preserved, fried, sugared, salted, colored, flavored, frozen, canned, devitalized, and commercialized foods in and out of schools. The Surgeon General reported in 2001 that over the past 20 years, the percentage of children who are overweight has doubled.¹

Another concern about the content of school lunches is the presence of pesticide residues. While the USDA promotes fresh fruits and vegetables, it does not address the issue of chemicals. A recent study by the University of Washington found that children who eat conventionally grown produce have six times the concentration of organophosphorus (OP) pesticide metabolites in their urine compared to children who eat organic produce.² OP pesticides are a class of insecticides that disrupt the nervous system and are among the most commonly used in U.S. agriculture.

The second goal of the Farm-to-School movement regards local farm economies. The USDA's Small Farm Commission Report states that the steady decline of the viability of the small farm economy has negatively impacted the health of our environment, farm workers, and communities. Local patterns of production, distribution and consumption of food are increasingly replaced by global operations and interests. Small and medium farmers are regularly squeezed out of business by high input costs, low prices for their

¹ Surgeon General - www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/toc.htm

² Pesticide Action Network - www.panna.org/resources/panups/panup_20030131.dv.html

products, and poor access to markets. Agribusiness mergers and consolidations result in the loss of market competition and fair market access for independent farmers. In response, the Small Farm Commission Report calls for USDA to "develop an interagency initiative to promote and foster local and regional food systems featuring farmers markets, community gardens, CSAs, and direct marketing to school lunch programs."

The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, which includes the National School Lunch Act encourages schools to purchase locally grown products as stated in Section 4303. A new paragraph was added in section 9 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. This provision requires the Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to encourage institutions participating in the school lunch and breakfast programs to purchase locally produced foods. The language states: "The secretary shall encourage institutions participating in the school lunch program under this Act and the school breakfast program established by section 4 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 to purchase, in addition to other food purchases, locally produced foods for the school meal programs, to the maximum extent practical and appropriate."

As for Washington State's involvement, the 2002 Washington State Legislature directed the Department of General Administration and the Washington Department of Agriculture (WSDA) to identify and recommend strategies to increase the amount of Washington grown products purchased by state agencies, institutions, and schools. The WSDA has promoted the purchase of locally grown foods from Washington farms by providing technical assistance and outreach to communities, schools, and farms that are interested in creating farm-to-cafeteria programs.

OSD Program Inception and Organizational Development

The Olympia School District in Washington State piloted an Organic Choices salad bar in October of 2002 at Lincoln Elementary. The pilot program was started when Vanessa Ruddy, a concerned parent from Lincoln Elementary, approached Child Nutrition Supervisor Paul Flock about the quality of school lunches. Vanessa arranged meetings with Lincoln parents, teachers, community members and Lincoln's principal at Paul Flock's office. From these meetings the new program was agreed upon.

The organic choice salad bar was explained and introduced at a Lincoln parent site council meeting and to the student body at an assembly one week before it started. There was a great deal of support from teachers, students, parents and school personnel once the program was underway. The start up goals in October of 2002 at Lincoln were:

- *To provide fresh organic produce
- *To provide alternative protein choices
- *To reduce sugar intake
- *To purchase locally grown foods
- *To do what was necessary to sustain the program.

The organic salad bar was added as a third complete meal option. The salad bar features organic fruit and vegetable choices, whole grain breads, vegetarian meat alternatives, eggs, and organic soymilk. It should be noted, however, that soymilk does not replace fluid milk as a required school lunch meal component. Cow's milk and juice are still served.

The fruit and vegetable bar was expanded by four feet to accommodate the additional offerings, which included whole grain rolls and three alternate protein items. Alternate protein choices agreed upon were hard boiled eggs, cottage cheese, sunflower seeds, salmon, tuna, garbanzo beans, organic soy beans, and kidney beans, and would be rotated to provide students with variety. The initial goal for the fruit and vegetable offerings was to have at least 50% of these items be organic.

Starting in the spring of 2002 (prior to the inception of the organic salad bar) teachers began teaching the "Three out of Five" federal food guidelines. This principle recommends that children's lunch choices include three items from the five lunch components: fruit, vegetable, protein, bread (grain) and dairy. By choosing "three out of five," children get a complete meal from the salad bar.

At the opening of the Organic Choices salad bar, Lincoln parent Vanessa Ruddy was sought out by cafeteria staff. They excitedly announced that children's eyes were lighting up. The fresh organic foods, it was noted, smelled fresher, were more colorful, and had more distinct flavors.



Lincoln Elementary School students make selections from the Organic Choices Salad Bar. This photo appeared in an article in the Olympian on October 2, 2002.

Teachers and parents are now participating more with students in the school lunch program. Monthly meetings have taken place since the pilot program's inception to keep key players in touch and issues discussed. The viability of the pilot program is dependent on keeping communications open with all those involved in the Lincoln program.

In the spring of 2003 Lincoln will begin to address the main entrees that are offered. The goals are to increase vegetarian choices and to reduce fat and salt content. They are looking at simple ideas such as rice and bean casserole, lentil soup, and pasta tuna salad. They will offer some of these on the Choices bar and will do some tasting events in the classrooms or in the cafeteria to generate enthusiasm and to introduce new tastes. The

focus on entrees may take some equipment and will certainly require training and creativity from kitchen personnel.

Many other schools have expressed interest in the pilot program at Lincoln, and to date four others have added organic choices to their cafeterias. Pioneer Elementary started their organic salad bar in December of 2002. This spring Boston Harbor Elementary was added to the list in March 2003, the Griffin School District in April, and Garfield Elementary began on May 1.

Farm-to-School Program

After an initial meeting between Paul Flock, Vanessa Ruddy, and Lincoln's principal Cheryl Petra, Paul contacted the WSDA Small Farms and Direct Marketing Program coordinator, Kelli Sanger in hopes of creating partnerships between schools and local farms. Kelli became instrumental in the initial planning meetings, and provided local farmer contact information to the Olympia School District. The local farmers in Thurston County, many of whom practice organic farming, are well organized. There are currently two main markets for these farmers, the local farmers' market and the food co-ops. Invitations were given to local farmers to explore the possibility of opening up a third market: providing organic produce for the Olympia School District's school lunch program. Personal written invitations were delivered to farms and a verbal invitation was given at a Thurston County small farmer's organization meeting.

The response from farmers was positive. The food service department reached an agreement with one local farm and is currently purchasing the organic potatoes and squash it grows. The food service department has also made an agreement with another local farmer, who began providing organic salad greens for the school lunch program in the spring of 2003.

The national farm-to-cafeteria movement is in its infancy. A practical approach is to move slowly so costs can be monitored as well as farm and school relationships. Initial results have been positive but there is a realization that this is a process that will take several years until its potential is realized.

Environmental Education and Nutrition Program

At Lincoln, the shift to organic choices was well advertised and enthusiastically added as an extension of a well-developed program already in place. Since its origins in 1984, the Lincoln Options Program has had a focus on environmental education. Lincoln has had an organic garden and large greenhouse since 1991, where children grow and eat communal crops as well as plan, plant, nurture and harvest from a class bed in the garden or greenhouse. The crops include mixed organic greens, herbs, gourds, green and dried beans, potatoes, and many other usual and unusual vegetables.

Beginning in Kindergarten, children harvest strawberries, raspberries, greens and other vegetables for nibbling during recess, garden work, and classroom snack times. Children

harvest and package seeds to sell from the organic garden. They sell potatoes, pumpkins, garlic, basil and other cash crops. Lincoln houses a children's activity kitchen so children cook and eat foods as a regular part of their experiential curriculum. Each fall the school hosts a school community Harvest Festival where children harvest, cook, and serve foods such as baked potatoes, bean dip, garlic bread, pumpkin pies, bread, apple crisp, and more.

Lincoln children are learning about the benefits of organic farming, which made the conversion to organic lunches a natural step. One class of 8 and 9 year old children began discussing and writing about the lunch program, as well as issues about pesticides, herbicides, and the environmental impact of shipping foods long distances rather than purchasing and eating local foods. What is being taught in the classroom about nutrition and organic foods is now connected to the foods children eat in the lunchroom.

A special feature at the school is an industrial size worm bin, which is used to compost garden and cafeteria food waste. Lincoln students are taught to weigh and compost this waste, which gives them insight as to the quantity of waste the school produces. All generated compost is then added to the school's garden beds. Thus, Lincoln students understand the entire process of growing, preparing, and enjoying food, and of composting and returning food scraps back to the cycle.

Many schools throughout the country are choosing to have their own gardens as part of their environmental education programs. The California Department of Education has a model program to this end called the Garden in Every School Initiative, which provides free information and grant funds to schools to start their own gardens. These programs give children the opportunity to experience growing food hands-on.

The Economics

The long-term health of children is of great concern. The Surgeon General reports that U.S. spending on hospital costs related to childhood obesity have tripled in the past 20 years.³ However, the increased costs associated with buying organic versus non-organic produce can, at first blush to a School Food Service Supervisor, seem daunting. The questions that remained to be answered were: how would additional food costs impact the present budget, and could it be sustainable?

It was decided that an organic salad mix would be an item that would be offered every day replacing the traditional iceberg salad mix. The organic salad that is offered is a mixture of greens that change seasonally. They are darker colored green, i.e. romaine, red leaf lettuce, radicchio, endive, arugula, and mustard greens, and are far superior in nutrient content than iceberg lettuce. The cost, however, is \$3.13 per pound versus \$.72 per pound for iceberg.

As a side note, it was discovered that an organic salad actually decreases the amount of salad a typical customer will take. The organic salad mix purchased is fresher and not

³ Chicago Tribune - <http://personal.monm.edu/jkessler/Art-Obesity-Kids.htm>

chopped up and processed like iceberg lettuce. It is fluffier and gives more plate coverage. Observations and calculations were made that showed customers take 30% to 50% less organic salad in weight, as opposed to processed iceberg lettuce.

Other organic salad bar items that are offered include seasonal fruit, cherry tomatoes, green peppers, potatoes, squash and cucumbers. These items are 30% to 60% higher in price than non-organic. Organic soymilk is available to students at no extra cost to students who purchase a lunch. The cost per serving of soymilk is approximately double that of liquid milk.

Cost-saving measures were taken in other areas. Desserts, which were featured on the lunch menu an average of twice a week, were eliminated to the delight of Lincoln parents and staff. The high amount of sugar children consume on a daily basis was a concern of many who were on the planning team. It was felt that offering desserts is a mixed message to students regarding healthy eating choices. That step alone covered most of the additional cost of the organic offerings. Instead of desserts, children are offered more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Other cost-saving steps were to switch from plastic disposable eating utensils to reusable silverware, and to make efforts to reduce food waste. The principal, teachers, educational assistants, and food service personnel at Lincoln worked with students to ensure that food waste was kept to a minimum by reminding students to take only what they would eat. Lincoln also recycles paper, mixed cartons and cans as well as milk cartons from the lunchroom.

Other Factors

During the late summer of 2002 two announcements by the USDA gave the Food Service Department some wiggle room to explore and look at the economic feasibility of an organic choice salad bar pilot.

In July the USDA reached an agreement with the Department of Defense (DOD) that gave school districts in Washington State an opportunity to utilize the DOD's fresh produce program. School districts choosing to participate in this program could divert commodity entitlement dollars that were typically used to purchase commodity dry goods, to purchase produce that is grown in the United States. The allocation is based on the number of reimbursable meals each school district serves. For the Olympia School District this would amount to \$15,000 or 20% of the previous year's expenditure for produce. The Olympia School District Food Service Department signed up for the program in the fall of 2002.

In August the USDA announced an unexpected increase in the commodity assistance rate. The reimbursement rate was increased from \$.1550 to \$.1802 per reimbursable meal served. This \$.025 increase would amount to approximately \$15,000 in additional commodity entitlement dollars per year for the school district. This dollar increase will help subsidize the school meal programs.

The Bottom Line

The organic choice salad bar program from a public relations standpoint has been a huge success. News of the program spread rapidly. Vanessa Ruddy contacted the local newspaper to get the message out to the community. She also contacted National Public Radio in Seattle, who came to Lincoln and aired the story in the morning news. As a result of that segment, a reporter from the Seattle P.I., who was trying to do a story on the organic school lunch program in Seattle, discovered there wasn't one. The reporter was already working on a story on USDA organic food labeling, and in the article he publicly commended Lincoln on its efforts. All of this attention has given the program notoriety.

The bottom line is that the organic choice salad bar is a viable option for our school district. Financially it not a burden on the school lunch program and its extra costs are manageable.

Participation rates are up 16% at Lincoln when compared to the same period of time from last year. An average of 104 students and staff eat lunch at Lincoln on a daily basis. Of the 104 an average of 35 or 33% opt for the organic salad lunch. At Pioneer Elementary school lunch participation rates have increased 13% when compared to previous months without the organic choice salad bar. An average of 155 students and staff eat lunch at Pioneer on a daily basis. Of the 155 an average of 25 or 16% opt for the organic salad lunch. Students and staff who purchase a hot lunch can utilize the salad bar and choose their favorite fruit and or vegetable as a side dish.

The most significant factor though, is the increase in the amount of fruit and vegetable servings taken by the students and staff. At Lincoln, fruit and vegetable servings are up 29% and at Pioneer up 25% when compared to data when no salad bar was being offered as a lunch choice at these schools.

The increased consumption of fruits and vegetables at Lincoln and Pioneer is very encouraging at a time when eating habits of our youth are under scrutiny. Nutrition information the public receives can be conflicting and hard to understand at times. The majority of nutrition experts do agree though, that the healthiest change one can make in one's diet is to consume more fruit and vegetables. That is why the results showing a significant rise in fruit and vegetable consumption by the students and staff at Lincoln and Pioneer are inspiring.

Keys to Success

- Find the right school where parents and administration will be active participants in children's nutritional and environmental education.
- Start small and build on successes.
- Gauge success by what children are consuming, not *solely* by controlling additional costs or by increasing participation.

- Arrange progress meetings as needed with parents, school principal, child nutrition supervisor and staff.
- Contact WSDA Small Farms and Direct Marketing program director Kelli Sanger to establish links with local farms.
- Involve students in all phases of the process.

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